

Era of Solitude – Helen Sear (2021) Published by Dewi Lewis Publishing

Introductory Text

Twenty two thousand four hundred and thirty four drop off donations, seven hundred and one total tonnage of reusable materials diverted from the waste stream, twenty three thousand square foot of retail store, open studio, gallery, design centre and offices. Three hundred and sixty four thousand people served, six thousand six hundred and fifty two volunteer hours and one hundred and seventeen tax registered employees. So reads the 2018 fact sheet from the Scrap Exchange in Durham North Carolina, a non-profit organisation whose mission is to promote creativity, environmental awareness and community, through reuse.

Located in a half-derelict shopping centre, this palace of excess, holds a treasure trove of everyday objects, now rendered extraordinary by their mass, volume and proximity to other materials. An Aladdin's cave in constant archival flux, each object appears as if an equal status has been bestowed upon it. Sorted into typologies that defy definition, the curatorial hands and eyes of a team of individuals can be glimpsed at every corner, in every staged setting and display.

It is hard to over emphasise the visual noise and sheer volume of stuff arriving to be re-processed for workshops or sold on to the public, or how important the "Scrap" is to all who work, shop, and participate in the numerous social activities generated by it. Whether through choice or necessity, people arrive, some returning daily, looking and often finding what they need to feed their imaginations, to solve a problem, to mend things broken, to make new and give life to the surplus and discarded remnants of consumer capitalism.

Just as they searched unsure of what they might turn up, so I had no idea who would agree to sit in the makeshift studio we constructed from old domestic lights and lengths of fabric sourced from the shop floor. Photographing strangers in the formal style of studio portraiture enabled a momentary stillness and connection amid the agitation of peripheral vision overload.

Four thousand square foot of blue-flecked linoleum floor is decorated with maps of the world. Political maps, physical maps, road maps, topographic maps, navigational charts, time zone maps, weather maps, income maps, resource maps, general reference maps, thematic maps. This random patchwork, traversed by thousands of people scuffing its surface, is slowly being worn away, the floor underneath emerging as new oceans eroding the graphic landmass. Fallen sticky price labels and other detritus settle across an ever-evolving cartography formed by human footfall.

All photographs were taken inside the Scrap Exchange in 2018 and 2019.

Helen Sear 2021